

The Senate Rules Committee has quietly adopted changes to the chamber's internet usage regulations to clarify the circumstances under which members are allowed to place content on external Web sites.

Under the new rules, which passed the panel Friday but were circulated Tuesday, Senate Internet services - including Web sites, e-mail, blogs, podcasts, streaming media on the senate.gov host-domain - may only be used for official purposes; not for personal, promotional, commercial, political or campaign activities.

As part of the change, Rules Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein and ranking member Robert Bennett included some exceptions. A member, committee or office may separately maintain Web sites or post material on third-party platforms as long as they abide by guidelines.

The Rules Committee plans to offer a "nonexhaustive list" of approved third-party sites. Those sites must agree to disclose when content is maintained by a Senate office and is banned from adding commercial or political material or links to an office-maintained page. Outside sites are also prohibited from using data-gathering tools on a Senate-maintained page that collect personal information on users and distribute it to other parties, according to a Rules Committee description.

If the use of a particular site is determined to pose a possible threat to security of the Senate's network, the committee can ban offices from using the site. The Rules Committee also requires the removal of a senator's third-party hosted content at the end of a member's term.

"The explosion of new Internet technologies can provide Senate offices with important ways to better communicate with the public and increase the transparency of government operations," Committee Staff Director Howard Gantman said. He said when the regulations were last revised in 2005, many of those technologies were in their infancy and prohibitions were left in place on their use. "With these new regulations, the Senate is taking a major step into the future," he said.

The debate over a similar proposal in the House was more heated, sparking a July sparring match between Minority Leader Boehner and Rep. Michael Capuano, D-Mass., who chairs the Commission on Mailing Standards.

Capuano offered a draft he said would explain what is communication worthy of taxpayer support and what is not. Boehner called it "an attack on free speech."

House Speaker Pelosi decried "inaccurate rumors" about the proposal, which Capuano said

would only affect video communications. A Capuano aide said Tuesday that the plan, which must pass the House Administration Committee, is under review.

Rep. John Culberson, R-Texas, sent a letter to Pelosi and Boehner this month asking they “help shine sunlight into the operations of the people’s House.”

The letter, signed by **Republican John Campbell** of California; and Mike Conaway and Ron Paul of Texas, said the House should “treat communication over new media outlets in a manner that is comprehensive and flexible enough to continually account for the broad spectrum of emerging Internet communication tools.”

Meanwhile, a GOP aid said members are trying to organize a Republican New Media Caucus to serve as a high-tech resource for members and to “ensure that Democrats aren’t able to enact any restrictive new rules.” A Dear Colleague announcing the caucus’ formation is expected to be circulated today.